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Lessons from the Front Line: Advocating for Vaccine Policies at the Texas Capitol During Turbulent Times

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INTRODUCTION

The anti-vaccine movement has become a destructive voice in state legislative politics in many states, including Texas. Ironically, most Texans support vaccines and laws requiring vaccination for school entry. Public opinion polling confirms that both Democrats and Republicans in Texas support expanded access to vaccines and laws requiring immunization for school attendance. Despite this broad support, attempts by the anti-vaccine community to influence elections are on the rise, and some Texas lawmakers are working hand in hand with anti-vaccine activists to dismantle the state's immunization laws.

This paper examines the origins of this political disconnect among a small group within the Republican Party and provides steps to counter its ill effects. It details how an issue with strong popular support can fall victim to politics and describes the circumstances that nurtured the rise of anti-vaccine politics in Texas. We begin by broadly describing the efficacy of vaccines, public support for vaccination, and the recent opposition toward vaccines in the U.S. Texas is used as an example to describe how advocates can pass immunization laws in the face of an organized anti-vaccine movement and within a volatile political context. We conclude by sharing lessons learned from the field, so other states and communities with existing or emerging anti-vaccine movements can effectively organize and continue to pass pro-vaccine legislation.

BACKGROUND

Safe and Effective Vaccines

Extensive scientific research conducted over the decades and across the world has consistently shown vaccines are a safe and effective way of preventing disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ranks vaccination as one of the top 10 public health achievements in the 20th century.¹

Immunization is cost effective and lifesaving. The CDC estimates that the immunization of children from 1994 to 2018 prevented over 400 million illnesses and saved over \$1 trillion dollars in societal costs.² Preventing disease through vaccination alleviates economic burdens on health care systems, keeps healthy people well, and protects individuals vulnerable to infectious diseases. Vaccination is a public health intervention that not only impacts an individual's health, but also impacts a larger population.

A high percentage of the population must be vaccinated to prevent the re-emergence of vaccine-preventable diseases. For example, approximately 95% of a population must be vaccinated to prevent the spread of measles.³ A decrease in vaccination rates within a population leads to lower immunity among community members, which increases the risk of vaccine-preventable outbreaks.⁴ Therefore, it is important to ensure our population maintains high vaccination rates.

Vaccination campaigns are an effective intervention to improve immunization coverage rates. Many times, though, campaigns are response to an outbreak. The small Pacific island nation of Samoa, with a population of close to 200,000, experienced a devastating outbreak in September 2019 as a result of a human error followed by a misinformation campaign. In 2018, two infants in the same hospital died after receiving a measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine. News of the deaths created panic in the community. Investigators later discovered that two nurses practicing in the same hospital wrongly co-administered MMR vaccine with a muscle relaxant to the two infants.⁵ That fear, coupled with a misinformation campaign led by anti-vaccine crusaders, led to a nationwide public health scare. Vaccination coverage rates dropped in 2018 to 31% from 74% in 2017.⁶ More than 5000 people were infected with measles. The Samoan government responded by declaring a state of emergency and implemented a mass vaccination campaign, which led to 93% of the population being vaccinated within a few months.⁷

Texas is another example of the benefits of vaccination campaigns and school requirements during an outbreak. In 1970, a measles outbreak occurred in Texarkana, a city bisected by the Texas-Arkansas border. Six hundred thirty-three cases of measles were confirmed during the Texarkana outbreak. Less than 5% of the measles cases in the outbreak

occurred on the Arkansas side of Texarkana while 95% of the measles cases occurred on the Texas side. Miller County, along the Arkansas border, had 70% of children between 1 and 9 years of age vaccinated. This was primarily due to a school requirement and other outreach campaigns. On the other hand, Bowie County, on the Texas side of Texarkana, had only 57% of children between the ages of 1 and 9 years vaccinated. There were no vaccination campaigns or a measles vaccine school requirement in Texas. Immunization clinics were subsequently held to vaccinate the unvaccinated. The outreach resulted in immunization coverage levels increasing to 81%.⁸

Most immunization laws are enacted at the state level, and state legislation is an effective intervention to achieve and maintain high immunization rates.⁹ The Texas-Arkansas case illustrates how school requirements positively effect immunization rates. All 50 states have vaccination requirements for school entry but allow for medical vaccine exemptions. Forty-five states allow exemptions based on religious beliefs, and 15 states allow parents to exempt their children from school-required vaccines because of philosophical beliefs.¹⁰

History of Opposition and Fear to Vaccines

Vaccine opposition has been around since the 1700s, when Dr. Edward Jenner created the first vaccine for smallpox. As far back as the late 18th and 19th century, anti-vaccine activists fought vaccination using arguments about safety, medical freedom, and parental rights. Many anti-vaccine activists distrusted government and were suspicious of scientific research. For example, there was a rumor that the smallpox vaccine would turn people into cows because it was made from cowpox pustules.¹¹ Similar arguments and fears remain with us in 2020. As each anti-vaccination argument is debunked, anti-vaccine activists create new unsubstantiated reasons to oppose vaccines. As the years go by, mistrust in vaccine science ebbs and flows.

Anti-vaccine arguments have remained similar over the last decade. "Vaccines cause autism," a debunked theory, still lies just beneath the surface of most anti-vaccine rhetoric.

These assertions are ultimately rooted in a fear of vaccines. Some people fear vaccines are unsafe and are uncomfortable with the amount of vaccines given early in a child's life. Some parents do not believe vaccines are necessary because they no longer see the disease. There is suspicion of pharmaceutical companies and their profit motives for making vaccines even though the World Health Organization reports that the global vaccine market is small compared to the pharmaceutical market.¹²

Parental rights are another issue. Some parents fear the government will take their children away because of their refusal to vaccinate.¹³

Additionally, some individuals fear social shunning of themselves and their children from parents of vaccinated children or others who learn of their medical choices.¹⁴ Many also fear they will lose their ability to get a vaccine exemption from school-required vaccinations, which they believe is an infringement on their personal beliefs.

Fear among anti-vaccine parents leads some to advocate on behalf of their own children but also against vaccines broadly. In one state capitol after another, anti-vaccine activists ultimately oppose all positive vaccine legislation including giving better access to vaccines to those who want to be vaccinated and improving data transparency.

The Rise of Politically Engaged Anti-vaccine Activists

The United States was built on principles of liberty and individualism, and these concepts have influenced how anti-vaccine rhetoric is designed and delivered. Over the past few years, anti-vaccine activists have used the concepts of liberty and individualism in extreme ways that disregard public health. Differences within political parties and short-term political posturing have begun to outweigh medical and public health considerations as policymakers decide on immunization laws. Anti-vaccine activists, at the expense of others, are creating a wedge within the Republican Party to push the narrative away from civic responsibility to a platform of individualism and medical freedom.¹⁵

However, this activism has moved from the chatter of a self-marginalized fringe group to a more sophisticated and savvy political operation attempting to take its message mainstream. Anti-vaccine

activists have learned that arguing against science does not always work with lawmakers. Though some activists continue to perpetuate false medical claims, more activists have begun to use the guise of “parental rights” to oppose even the most basic vaccine policies. Anti-vaccine politics, particularly in Texas, has become part of a larger shift in political rhetoric and during primary elections in both political parties. Narrowing or widening the scope of public-school vaccine exemptions has become a policy flashpoint at state legislatures across the United States, particularly in California, Texas, Oklahoma, and recently in New York and New Jersey.¹⁶ Activists turn out by the dozens in state legislatures across the nation. They camp out in capitol hallways, fill hearing rooms and force hours upon hours of repetitive testimony with misinformation, and at times disrupt and hurl insults at state legislators.¹⁷

Activists have become a fixture working on campaigns against state legislators who introduce stronger immunization laws. California state Senator Richard Pan, a Democrat, introduced legislation in 2015 to remove philosophical belief vaccine exemptions. In one of the most contentious vaccine fights in recent years, he successfully passed Senate Bill 277 into law. However, he faced immense political backlash. Anti-vaccine activists worked unsuccessfully to recall him in 2015 and 2019.¹⁸ In Oklahoma, incumbent state Senator Dr. Erwin Yen proposed legislation to remove philosophical belief exemptions. An opponent supported by grassroots anti-vaccine activists challenged the senator, a moderate Republican, in the primary. Senator Yen lost his primary election, but his Republican challenger ultimately lost to his Democratic opponent in the general election.¹⁹ Some anti-vaccine groups in states like Ohio, Michigan, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Texas have gone one step further by establishing political action committees (PACs) to receive contributions to participate in electioneering.²⁰ Campaign finance reports on the Texas Ethics Commission website show that the Texas anti-vaccine PAC received over \$200,000 in contributions between 2018 and 2019.²¹

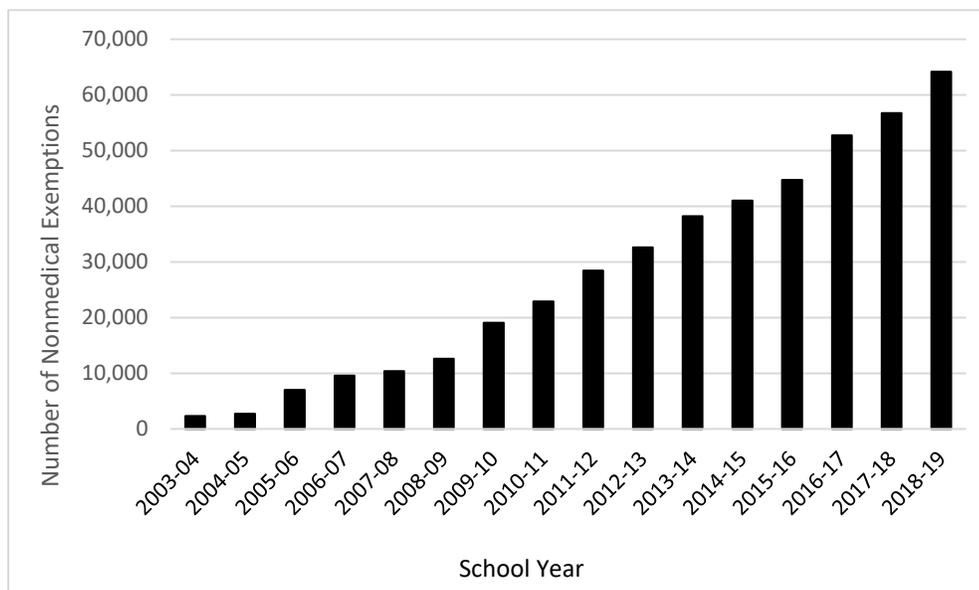
IMMUNIZATION POLICY AND POLITICS IN TEXAS

Texas serves as an example of the politicization of vaccines and provides a window into how pro-vaccine advocates are navigating and responding to an increasingly contentious political climate.

Growth of Philosophical or Personal Belief Vaccine Exemptions and Vaccine-Preventable Diseases in Texas

As a result of anti-vaccine campaigns, difficulty accessing vaccines, and loose vaccine exemption laws, more families in Texas are opting their children out of school-required immunizations (Figure 1). The 2003 law to allow vaccine exemptions based on reasons of conscience has led to an increase in families filing philosophical belief exemptions. In 2003, parents filed 2314 philosophical belief exemptions versus 64,176 in 2018-2019, a 26-fold increase.²²

Figure 1: Texas Nonmedical Vaccine Exemptions (2003-2019)



Source: *The Immunization Partnership*

Research shows philosophical belief exemptions and the children who have been exempted from school-required vaccines cluster

geographically in neighborhoods, schools, and faith-based communities. Pockets of unvaccinated individuals lead to increased risk for disease outbreaks.²³

Opposition to vaccines has real and dire public health implications. Between January and September 2019, more than 20 cases of measles were confirmed across Texas.²⁴ The greater Houston area had a cluster of measles cases, and El Paso had its first measles outbreak in 25 years. The Waco area experienced a pertussis outbreak last summer. Experts attribute some of this increase to the recent rise of organized, coordinated, and vocal anti-vaccination campaigns.²⁵

Growth of the Anti-vaccine Movement in Texas

Events in the early 2000s help explain the current anti-vaccine climate. In 2002, President George W. Bush carried his party to victory during the first mid-term election of his presidency after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This election and newly redrawn legislative maps allowed Republicans in Texas to seize control of the Texas House of Representatives for the first time since Reconstruction.

After decades in the political wild, Republicans controlled all branches of government in Texas and, as a result, passed sweeping legislation. They dramatically shrank and consolidated all human health services in Texas, including the state agencies responsible for immunization programs. In 2003, during the 78th Regular Legislative Session, House Bill (HB) 2292 was filed. The 311-page massive health and human services reform and agency consolidation bill had clear policy goals: cut services, save money, reduce the size of state agencies, and keep government out of people's lives.

HB 2292 included a change to statute that would haunt public health advocates in Texas for years to come. While the state had always allowed parents to opt their children out of mandatory school vaccines for medical reasons, a Texas state senator quietly added an amendment to allow parents to exempt their children out of school-required vaccines because of their philosophical beliefs. The amended language was adopted into HB 2292, and the legislature passed the bill, which the governor signed into law.

The passage of HB 2292 represented a growing anti-government fervor in 2003. Intensely conservative elected officials set health policy in Texas on a course of cuts to many basic services and decreased access to health care services for thousands of children and adults. Simultaneously, state politicians were eager to reward favored constituencies, such as home school factions and other groups advocating for strict parental rights and less government oversight. As a result, the Texas Legislature began to favor legislation that increased parental control, even to the potential detriment to the health of children. The election of President Barack Obama and the passage of the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, only added fuel to the anti-government and anti-public health care voices already attacking vaccines at the Texas Capitol.

Events outside the state also influenced and fueled anti-vaccine activism in Texas. In 2015, California experienced a measles outbreak that originated in Disneyland. The incident led California and other states to re-evaluate their school exemption policies concerning immunizations. California passed SB 277 into law to remove personal belief exemptions. Anti-vaccine activists in Texas took note, and cries of “Don’t California My Texas!” soon rang out at the Texas Capitol that same year when State Representative Jason Villalba from Dallas, (House District 114-R) filed HB 2006 to eliminate philosophical belief exemptions to vaccinations for public school attendance.

The fear of removing philosophical belief exemptions led Texas anti-vaccine supporters to form the first “vaccine choice” PAC in the country after the 2015 legislative session. Activists dabbled in a small handful of state legislative races in 2016 and campaigned on behalf of lawmakers who supported their position. Texas legislators, particularly Republicans leery of primary election opponents, began to fear electoral consequences if they were to support vaccines or oppose anti-vaccine activists and their agenda.

The pinnacle, so far, of anti-vaccine PAC and campaign finance activity in Texas occurred in the 2018 election cycle. During the 2018 election year, anti-vaccine supporters campaigned vigorously in two races. In direct retaliation for Villalba’s efforts to limit vaccine exemptions, anti-vaccine supporters made an organized effort to support his primary opponent. They also focused their attention on backing the primary

opponent running against incumbent State Representative Sarah Davis from West University (House District 134-R), whose district includes the Texas Medical Center, the largest medical center in the world.

This strategy proved ineffective. The more support Republican candidates received from anti-vaccine activists in the primary, the more likely they were to lose in the general election. While Representative Villalba lost his primary election to his challenger, his challenger lost in the general election to her Democratic opponent. Representative Davis, a strong legislative champion for positive immunization policy, won both her primary and general election.

The 2018 midterm election cycle in Texas was the political inverse of the 2002 election and brought Democrats back in record numbers, resulting in greater compromise and less ideological fury. Yet, the 2019 Texas Legislature saw little positive movement on vaccine legislation, despite the reappearance of measles in Texas and an announcement in March that a page on the floor of Texas House of Representatives was diagnosed with an active case of whooping cough.²⁶ Neither the measles outbreak nor the pertussis case received much attention inside the Capitol building.

Factors Influencing Anti-vaccine Advocacy in Texas

The political climate in Texas and several factors created an environment that increased the influence of anti-vaccine activists in Texas.

- **Redistricting and one-party rule:** In Texas primary politics, especially Republican primary politics, a few hundred votes or a few thousand dollars can swing the outcome of a legislative race. Legislative districts in Texas are drawn to prevent competition. For two decades, most Texas political races have been determined in the primary. When a politician's only political contest is the primary, they play to primary voters, who are the most extreme voters in both parties. In Texas, the effects of gerrymandering mean that many legislative races are determined in the primary election. Anti-vaccine activists have learned that a small group of highly organized and mobilized activists can have an outsize impact

during partisan primaries. Elections can be won or lost by a small number of votes. By targeting vulnerable candidates and providing political money and volunteers, anti-vaccine activists have emerged as political operators in traditional and grassroots Republican circles. In Texas, anti-vaccine activists target primary elections to frighten pro-vaccine Republican candidates into silence.

- **Voter apathy:** Pro-vaccine supporters pay less attention compared to anti-vaccine activists to what is happening at the state capitol as it relates to vaccine policies. Anti-vaccine supporters are motivated to engage in the political process because they feel like they have something to fight for. This constituency votes in primaries and general elections. They make small-dollar contributions, block walk, and volunteer for candidates. Anti-vaccine activists represent a voting block that participates in the primary election process. The voting block has outsized influence and power and creates the illusion that the group is bigger than it is.
- **Powerful allies:** Traditionally, anti-vaccine activists have existed on the political fringes. The new breed of activists aligns with a small yet vocal group of other organizations and anti-establishment legislators within the Republican Party. Instead of operating on the margins, they have inserted themselves into issues such as foster care, child protective services, and medical neglect. They use these kinds of issues, which don't typically involve vaccination policies, as a vehicle to push their anti-vaccination views. Additionally, anti-vaccine organizations make political financial contributions and share political consultants with other anti-government organizations and activists. While seemingly independent, the anti-vaccine movement is part of a larger web of allied organizations that focus on reducing the size and role of government in the daily lives and choices of citizens.
- **Legislative presence:** In many states, anti-vaccine activists are the single most visible advocates on *any* issue, and this is true in Texas. There is strength and intimidation in numbers. These advocates engage in ongoing and consistent dialogue with legislative offices in state capitols across the country. The sheer volume of phone calls and legislative visits dissuades even the

most pro-vaccine legislators from filing or voting for good vaccine bills. Legislative offices have reported calls from anti-vaccine activists from all across the country in addition to calls from their home district. Legislators do not want to or cannot deal with hundreds of calls and visits resulting from filing pro-vaccine bills. Anti-vaccine activists used to focus their efforts to stop positive vaccine legislation. In recent years, emboldened anti-vaccine activists have begun to proactively file bills to loosen the exemption process, prevent public health officials from collecting data, and penalize health care professionals who dismiss families from their clinical practice who chose not to vaccinate their children.

- **Ideology that resonates in Texas:** Regardless of party affiliation or ideological identification, policies to loosen vaccine exemptions in Texas and advance other anti-vaccine policy proposals like restricting easy access to vaccines or information are associated with themes of “liberty,” “freedom,” and increasingly “parental rights.” Anti-vaccine sentiment and resulting policies seem to be rooted in a defiance of scientific authority, a belief in personal privilege, and disregard for public health or a neighbor’s health. Primary election voters who equate “parental choice” on vaccines with “liberty” and “freedom” will not be swayed with arguments about public health, reduced medical costs, or, as we have seen time and time again in hearing rooms at the Texas Capitol, arguments about lives lost and saved. Politicians are risk averse and are likely to default to the perceived politically safe choice, which includes staying silent on the issue.

Broad Support for Vaccines and Immunization Requirements

Despite the rise of vaccine hesitancy and activities among anti-vaccine groups, most Americans support immunization and school immunization requirements. In 2015, Reuters/Ipsos reported that “78% of respondents... said all children should be vaccinated unless there is a direct health risk to them from vaccination.”²⁷ More recently, the Pew

Research Center reported that 88% of Americans believe the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks.²⁸

Over the years, state immunization laws and policies have had bipartisan support among voters.²⁹ Blank and Shaw conducted a survey measuring partisan attitudes toward science. The survey examined Americans' views on science in 16 policy areas, including mandatory childhood vaccination policies. Their results showed that self-identified Republicans were just as likely as Democrats to support mandatory vaccination.³⁰

Three different statewide polls conducted in 2018 and 2019 reinforce broad support for vaccines. The Texas Public Health Coalition, consisting of more than 30 organizations including the Texas Medical Association, American Cancer Society, The Immunization Partnership, and United Ways of Texas, commissioned a survey by Ragnar Research Partners in July 2018 to better understand the beliefs of voters and to educate policymakers.

The survey measured Republican primary voters' beliefs about vaccines and immunization policy. The rationale for assessing the views of this constituency was three-fold: 1) The Texas GOP represented the majority at the Texas Legislature, 2) all anti-vaccine legislation filed the previous legislative session (2017) was sponsored by members of the majority party, and 3) the 2018 Texas GOP statewide party platform included an anti-vaccination plank.³¹ Topics in the survey included school immunization requirements and the government's role in protecting the public's health. The sample size was 750 Republican primary voters across Texas.³²

Survey results showed that a significant majority of Texas Republican primary voters supported child immunization requirements. Eighty-six percent of respondents supported the law to require school-age children to be vaccinated for school entry. Sixty-seven percent surveyed believed the government has a role in reducing the number of vaccine-preventable deaths. Almost 70% said parents should not be allowed to opt out of school-required vaccines, and almost 80% said schools should be required to report the number of unvaccinated children in public school. Ragnar Research's survey demonstrates that while anti-vaccine activists are vocal and organized and tend to align with the Republican party, their

views do not represent most Republican voters in Texas. The Texas Lyceum, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group, conducted another poll in 2018. Most respondents (78%) believed children should be vaccinated for school entry, and only 16% stated that parents should be able to opt out of vaccinating their children.³³ Differences among “likely voters” were small, with 22% of Independents, 20% of Republicans, and 16% of Democrats in favor of allowing parents to opt their children out of vaccination.³⁴

Earlier in 2019, a University of Texas/*Texas Tribune* poll found that 78% of voters supported school vaccination requirements. Eighty-six percent of Democrats, 73% of Republicans, and 67% of Independents favored vaccine requirements.³⁵ Survey results show that a majority of Texans support vaccination and vaccination laws.

Progress of Pro-immunization Advocates Across Texas

It is difficult to pass legislation in Texas. Like most state legislatures, the system is designed to kill bills rather than to pass them. In the past two legislative cycles, forward progress has slowed, and anti-vaccine crusading has grown. Instead of making progress to prevent disease, expand vaccine accessibility to vulnerable individuals, and improve data transparency, scientists, doctors, and parents who support vaccination must defend against further attacks on the public’s health.

Yet, there is reason to be optimistic. Even though the system is designed to make it difficult to pass bills, Texas has passed several pieces of legislation related to immunization. Immunization advocates and organizations in Texas such as The Immunization Partnership, the state medical and pediatric organizations, and other nonprofit advocacy groups can take credit for passing these bills and preventing bad legislation from advancing. These laws include the country’s first meningitis vaccine requirement for college admission and numerous bills and measures that expand access to vaccine and immunization information for children and adults. In the face of unrelenting opposition during the past 2 years, pro-immunization advocates in Texas have made remarkable strides to improve the state’s immunization policy landscape. Between 2007 to 2019, the Texas Legislature passed more than 20 pieces of positive immunization legislation³⁶ (Table 1).

Table 1. Pro-immunization Legislation Passed in Texas (2007-2019)³⁷

| 2007 - 80th Texas Legislative Session | | |
|--|---|------------------------------|
| Bill Number | Legislation Signed into Law | Bill Author and Party |
| HB 1059 | Relating to an immunization awareness program in certain school districts. | Rep. Tan Parker (R) |
| HB 3184 | Relating to educating parents about the benefits of immunizing certain children against influenza. | Rep. Garnet Coleman (D) |
| SB 11 | Relating to homeland security and protection of the public, including protections against human trafficking; providing penalties. | Sen. John Carona (R) |
| SB 811 | Relating to requiring the Department of State Health Services to allow health care providers to use certain vaccines in the Vaccines for Children program and to the procurement of those vaccines. | Sen. Kyle Janek (R) |
| SB 204 | Relating to certain electronic medical records systems. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R) |
| SB 140 | Relating to a study of the feasibility of providing immunizations to certain students enrolled in health professional degree programs. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R), et al |

Table 1 (continued).

| 2009 - 81st Texas Legislative Session | | |
|--|---|------------------------------|
| Bill Number | Legislation Signed into Law | Bill Author and Party |
| HB 448 | Relating to requiring the Department of State Health Services to implement a provider choice system for certain vaccines. | Rep. Chuck Hopson (R) |
| HB 1409 | Relating to the minimum patient age for administration of an influenza vaccination by a pharmacist. | Rep. Chuck Hopson (R) |
| HB 4189 | Relating to the conduct of compliance programs by institutions of higher education and to the vaccination of students of institutions of higher education against bacterial meningitis. | Rep. Patrick Rose (D) |
| SB 819 ¹ | Relating to the vaccination against bacterial meningitis of certain first-time students at public and private or independent institutions of higher education. | Sen. Wendy Davis (D) |
| SB 291 | Relating to hepatitis B vaccination for students enrolled in certain health-related courses of study at an institution of higher education. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R) |
| SB 346 | Relating to information submitted to and maintained in the immunization registry after an individual becomes an adult. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R) et al |
| SB 347 | Relating to the receipt and release of immunization information by the immunization registry in connection with a disaster; providing penalties. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R) et al |
| SB 1328 | Relating to a study on the feasibility of providing vaccines to first responders deployed to a disaster area. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R) |

¹ SB 819 was amended onto HB 4189 in the Senate

Table 1 (continued).

| 2011 - 82nd Texas Legislative Session | | |
|--|--|------------------------------|
| Bill Number | Legislation Signed into Law | Bill Author and Party |
| HB 3336 | Relating to information regarding pertussis for parents of newborn children. | Rep. Garnet Coleman (D) |
| SB 1107 | Relating to the vaccination against bacterial meningitis of entering students at public and private or independent institutions of higher education. | Sen. Wendy Davis (D) et al |

| 2013 - 83rd Texas Legislative Session | | |
|--|--|------------------------------|
| Bill Number | Legislation Signed into Law | Bill Author and Party |
| SB 62 | Relating to the vaccination against bacterial meningitis of entering students at public and private or independent institutions of higher education. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R) |
| SB 63 | Relating to consent to the immunization of certain children. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R) |
| SB 64 | Relating to a policy on vaccine-preventable diseases for licensed child-care facilities. | Sen. Jane Nelson (R) et al |

| 2015 - 84th Texas Legislative Session | | |
|--|--|-------------------------------|
| Bill Number | Legislation Signed into Law | Bill Author and Party |
| HB 2171 | Relating to information maintained in the immunization registry with the consent of an individual after the individual becomes an adult. | Rep. J.D. Sheffield (R) et al |

Table 1 (continued).

| 2017 - 85th Texas Legislative Session | | |
|--|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Bill Number | Legislation Signed into Law | Bill Author and Party |
| No bills passed | | |

| 2019 - 86th Texas Legislative Session | | |
|--|---|------------------------------|
| Bill Number | Legislation Signed into Law | Bill Author and Party |
| HB 1256 | Relating to access by certain persons to a first responder's immunization history. | Rep. Dade Phelan (R) et al |
| HB 1418 | Relating to disease prevention and preparedness information for emergency medical services personnel on certification or recertification. | Rep. Dade Phelan (R) |

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Advocates and others working to improve access to vaccines and immunization coverage rates in Texas have learned a lot over the past decade of countering the anti-vaccine movement. Pro-vaccine advocates in Texas have identified and tested several different ways to engage lawmakers and effectively move legislative policies. The recommendations that follow result from our work.

- 1. Stick to a clear and focused message about the positive impacts of vaccines and the destructive power of anti-vaccine activism.** Regardless of their tactics and strategies, anti-vaccine advocates are destined to fail because most voters support strong immunization laws. Recent history in Texas and Oklahoma suggests that anti-vaccine activists may win in Republican primary elections, but they are likely to lose in the general election with its broader range of voters.
- 2. Remain nonpartisan and stick to the science.** Democrats, Republicans, and Independents support vaccines. While others may

attempt to use vaccination to create political division, pro-vaccine advocates must focus on highlighting universal and bipartisan support for vaccines. When pro-vaccine advocates prioritize science-based reform, the research supports their work.

- 3. Leverage state medical and nonprofit networks and work closely with like-minded partners to help create a unified and amplified front.** Texas has a strong network of medical professional organizations and societies, public health experts, nonprofit organizations, and a robust philanthropic community. Additionally, organizations like The Immunization Partnership, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization solely focused on immunization education, advocacy, and policy, collaborates frequently with other organizations to advance effective immunization legislation and stop bad legislation. Health care professionals are a critical component of the network and must remain visible and vocal advocates at the state capitol and in front of lawmakers. Their personal expertise and experience lend credibility and a different perspective to decision makers.
- 4. Create a rapid response grassroots network.** Lawmakers need to see constituents and hear their personal stories inside the capitol and in their district offices. Pro-vaccine advocates should organize community supporters through social media and list serves to activate people to take action through phone calls, emails, or personal visits during legislative sessions, legislative hearings, or town hall meetings. Because anti-vaccine groups are very active, vocal, and present, legislators are often left with the erroneous impression that they are bigger than they actually are. If pro-vaccine supporters fail to communicate to legislators their support for vaccines, then legislators will fail to see the issue as important. Vaccine advocates must be persistent. Texas is fortunate to have Immunize Texas, a statewide grassroots network of people representing the community perspective. Grassroots voices along with medical and policy experts' voices lead to an effective and powerful combination.
- 5. Stay vigilant at the local and state levels.** The state capitol is not the only place anti-vaccine activists are working to reform immunization policies. Cities, counties, and school districts are also under constant pressure from anti-vaccine activists looking to

circumvent or compromise state law. The job of pro-vaccine advocates is often to provide political cover for politicians who genuinely want to support vaccination. Without public support, elected officials are hesitant to wade into a controversial issue like vaccination. Elected officials, in turn, have a duty to protect the public's health by supporting positive immunization legislation. Policy makers must avoid relying on misinformation and false narratives propagated by anti-vaccine activists to base their policy decisions. Support for weak or lax immunization policies can lead to public health security risks.

- 6. Create an effective social media strategy.** The battle to distribute accurate information about vaccines is happening online. The tactics anti-vaccine activists use is similar to propaganda models. Anti-vaccine activists take to social media and produce high volumes of falsehoods and stories about vaccines and organize quickly to push a rapid succession of negative comments on social media posts that support immunization. They organize online attacks against medical professionals supporting vaccination.³⁸ Their disinformation campaign is effectively coordinated and is a “firehose” of misinformation. Online platforms create an easy way for anti-vaccine activists to mobilize politically and distribute misinformation. Social media companies such as Facebook and Pinterest have started to take steps to curb anti-vaccine misinformation. Pinterest, for example, directs viewers searching for vaccine information to “leading public health organizations” and prevents anti-vaccine advertisements on their platform.³⁹ Pro-vaccine advocates should amplify and maintain a visible and persistent social media presence to promote a positive and public health-oriented vision of vaccines.

Vaccine supporters may consider adopting strategies used to combat the firehose of Russian propaganda. Paul and Matthews suggest measures like showing readers how propagandists manipulate audiences. This, instead of fighting the specific manipulations, can be an effective way to rebut disinformation campaigns. The authors also suggest that, rather than countering the falsehoods themselves, vaccine supporters should increase the flow of persuasive information toward the targeted audience. For example, pro-immunization

- advocates should focus on vaccine-hesitant individuals seeking credible and factual information.⁴⁰
- 7. Craft stories to advocate effectively.** Medical and public health officials root their discussions in data and rational arguments. Ideological differences occur within political parties, and lawmakers and others often shape discussions and make decisions based on moral intuitions. Liberals and conservatives view their social worlds differently. Matthews et al examined the differences in moral intuitions between political liberals and conservatives using Jonathan Haidt's moral foundation framework. Their work suggests that messaging is nuanced even when messaging to legislators within the same political party. Understanding the spectrum of ideological perspectives and crafting messaging to appeal to both liberals and conservatives within parties can help create consensus.⁴¹
 - 8. Be politically present and visible.** Anti-vaccine activists are increasingly involved in political campaigns as donors and volunteers. Texas anti-vaccine activists have attended the Democratic and Republican state conventions and successfully managed to get an anti-vaccine plank adopted in the Texas Republican Party's 2018 platform. Pro-vaccine advocates must match this engagement and enthusiasm. Advocates in Texas must strengthen trust among politicians and show vaccines are a politically safe issue. Pro-vaccine organizations should consider creating 501(c)(4)s or PACs to facilitate participation in electoral activities.
 - 9. Raise public awareness.** Most Texans have no idea that vaccines are under attack at their legislature. Most Texans do not consider how vaccines have benefitted their lives. In many ways, the invisible power of vaccines is a barrier to engaging pro-vaccine advocates. An effective communications campaign can create political will to counter the anti-vaccine movement. Americans will support candidates who support vaccines.
 - 10. Obtain funding to build infrastructure and a national network.** Pro-immunization advocates in state capitols can and do win, but they need more resources to be successful in the long term. Pro-vaccine advocates across the states need better funding to build out the

current infrastructure to allow advocates to increase their numbers and share best practices, ideas, model legislation, and research.

CONCLUSION

The anti-vaccination movement in Texas has long been a loud and comparatively small group of individuals seeking to prevent strong immunization laws. Prior to 2015, anti-vaccine activists routinely attempted to block positive legislation but did not proactively file their own bills. The dynamics changed in 2015 when a Texas representative filed a bill to eliminate philosophical belief exemptions to vaccinations for public school attendance. Anti-vaccine activists reacted by filing their own bills in the following legislative sessions yet failed to move bills through the legislative process.

Despite the opposition, immunization champions and advocates in Texas have achieved policy success in the past decade. Even though pro-vaccine advocates in Texas work in a challenging political environment, they have managed to pass over a dozen bills since 2007.

Vaccine advocates across the country can build an organized network to improve public health and prevent the reemergence of vaccine-preventable diseases. Supporters can promote survey findings that show most people, regardless of political affiliation, support immunization. They must continue to be vocal and actively engage in the policy-making process. Vaccine supporters must be able to message to ideological differences within each party to reassure lawmakers they will not lose on this issue by supporting it. They should educate and share personal stories with lawmakers about the public health benefits of vaccination.

To shift the vaccine narrative away from the anti-vaccine community, lawmakers must see that most constituents support positive vaccination policies. Vaccine supporters must hold lawmakers accountable through active citizen engagement to ensure that lawmakers are basing their policy decisions on factual and scientific information and not misinformation or false narratives. The unification of vaccine advocates, medical experts, and the grassroots community is a powerful force to represent the public health value of vaccination.

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